

Writing the Book on Zelda

IGN64 spoke with Jason Rich, author of the upcoming novelization of Ocarina of Time.

October 30, 1998

Jason Rich, a 31-year-old videogame journalist from Foxboro, MA, has been writing about games since his college days when he started at Gameplayers Magazine. With **Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time**, published by Sybex, Rich presents gamers with his first novel based on a popular videogame.

IGN64 sat down with Rich to talk about the upcoming novel.

Q: Many gamers may not know you, Jason. Can you talk a little about your background in videogames?

Rich: I've been covering videogames for the last 13 years, for both industry-oriented publications like GameWeek as well as for consumer magazines. Not so much the hardcore gaming magazines, but more consumer magazines like Family PC, Disney Adventures, the Chicago Tribune, and a bunch of others.

Q: You pretty much wrote business news and reviews?

Rich: Yes. I also wrote a lot of "making of" articles and interviews with game developers, offering behind-the-scenes looks at how games are created. That type of thing.

Q: How did you move from game journalism to fiction writing?

Rich: This is the first time I've done something like this. I've done a lot of writing targeted to kids in the past, I've done thousands of movie reviews, celebrity interviews, for newspapers and magazines, as well as for television and radio. I think I know the kid market well and I know how to write to them and write for them. I was talking to Roger Stewart, one of the publishers over at Sybex, who I have written traditional strategy guides for in the past. I did their Civilization I and II strategy guides, Resident Evil 2, Age of Empires.

We were just talking about some ideas for strategy guides for the holiday season and we just came up with the idea of doing fictionalized novels of popular games. It's been done for some adult games, like Doom or Resident Evil, but nothing targeted at young teens. What we did is take more of a storybook approach, with lots of color screen-shots and character art and offering it at a good price.

Q: Out of all the titles, why did you decide on Zelda?

Rich: We came up with the idea to do this in general, and obviously when we thought about specific titles, the number one game this year will be Zelda. Nintendo had never done anything like this either, but we called them up and we were able to work out a licensing deal.

Q: So this book is based specifically on Ocarina of Time?

Rich: The game has a tremendous story. I basically took that plot and adapted it into a novel. It follows Link through the whole game, he meets all the key characters, and we give some very basic strategy, like "Link used this sword to defeat this boss," or "he found the hover boots or the mirror shield," but we don't give out any button sequences, so it's not a strategy guide.

Q: Can you give us a short synopsis of the book?

Rich: In the first chapter, Link meets the great Deku Tree and learns that he has to go on a journey to save Hyrule. And just like he learns bits and pieces of the story in the game, he does so in the book. He has to go out and find the sacred stones. He meets Zelda and later has to rescue her and defeat Ganondorf, who has basically taken over the world. He travels back and forth through time, visiting temples to find medallions. He then needs to rescue the Sages and team up with them to battle Ganondorf at the end. The book follows Link into each of the temples as he explores the temples up to the ultimate battle.

Q: What are some of the differences to the plot of the game?

Rich: We took the plot of the game and didn't make any changes. In order to maintain the integrity of the license I didn't make up new

plot elements. I did embellish the story to make it more of a novel than a strategy guide, but I didn't go off on any strange tangents.

Q: Should gamers be worried that the book gives away too much of the game, or is it save to read the book before playing?

Rich: If you want a preview of what they're going to get, then you definitely want to read the novel first. You will get insights into how to beat the bosses, but it will not help you beat the game, ultimately. It will, and it won't. You learn what will happen, but the game is so incredibly big, we couldn't include everything. There are still hundreds of enemies and puzzles that the book mentions, but doesn't tell you how to beat them. There are objects that Link has to find, but it doesn't tell you how to find them. The game is also very challenging. Even if you know what to do and what button to push, you're not going to be able to do it that easily.

Q: What are some of your literary influences?

Rich: I've been doing strategies and a lot of kid-oriented stuff, so I just followed the same format kids will like. When you have an incredible property to deal with like Zelda, then it's a pretty fun project.

Q: So you don't have any favorite fantasy writers you were trying to emulate?

Rich: In terms of kid-stuff, no. But I read a lot of adult fiction, but I wouldn't say that anything specifically influenced me. The biggest influence in this case was obviously the game. I wanted to stay as close to Miyamoto's story as possible and make the reader feel that he is experiencing the game by reading it.

Q: Ocarina of Time is pretty much a closed off story. Are there any plot lines from the older Zelda games that work into this one?

Rich: Not from the older Zelda games, but the way this one ends is kind of like a cliffhanger. It does leave itself open for sequels, both on the games and the novel side.

Q: Perhaps you could help us solve this mystery, is there one Link and one Zelda, or a lineage of Links and Zeldas?

Rich: There is one Link and one Zelda, but they jump through time.

Q: How about in the whole Zelda universe, not only in Ocarina of Time?

Rich: I'm not sure how they will link that together, but Ocarina of Time is the prequel to everything. The way it ends is that Link and Zelda can pretty much become anything thanks to the Temple of Time. There is a lot that can be done for future games or to tie in the games that have already been released.

Q: Did Miyamoto and his team have some influence on the direction you took with the book?

Rich: I pretty much had access to the game, but Nintendo Japan will read the book for final approval. I was given guidelines and it had to be consistent with the game. I couldn't give Link any special powers to make the story more exciting. And there really was no need to do that.

Q: Have you played through the whole game?

Rich: Yes. Actually, I had a Nintendo game counselor, Patrick Taylor, play through it at Nintendo and we videotaped it. As I ran into questions he was able to get me answers by talking to people in his department who had beaten the game.

Q: So how long is the game?

Rich: It took him about 40 hours to complete. And he had already beaten it several times. He knew what was coming and he is an excellent gameplayer. If I were to play it, it would probably take up to 200 hours (laughs). In addition to the core plot, there are a lot of sub-plots and missions you can go on that don't impact the ending of the game, but really enhance the gameplay. Some of which I covered in the book, some of which I didn't have room for. There is this whole thing where Link goes to a mask shop and has to trade masks with other characters in the game. I just didn't have room for that.

Q: You have reviewed a lot of games in your life - how do you think Zelda stacks up to the games you have played in the past?

Rich: It's one of the best games I have ever seen. Based on everything else I have seen this year, I think that Zelda is probably a year or two ahead of its time. Nothing coming out this year looks and plays anything like it. There are a lot of great games out there for PlayStation and Nintendo 64, but none of this caliber. Nintendo admits to spending \$10 million on development and having a team of 200 working more than two years on this game. No other company has put in these kinds of resources, and the results are obvious when you play it.

Q: What do you think Zelda 64 does that no other game does?

Rich: The graphics are amazing. You have the 3D character in a 3D world, there is a story, there are well-developed characters, and it's big. There is so much to do, so much to explore. Nothing is linear in the game. You can go anywhere, do anything and try things out. You have so much freedom. It's a combination of having the characters, having the story, the superior graphics and having this huge world all put together. Other games may have bits and pieces of this, but not everything together. That's what sets it apart.

Q: What are some of your other favorite games that you have played in the past?

Rich: Oddworld from GT was very original. On the computer-side, Age of Empires.

Q: How about N64?

Rich: Mario 64 is definitely up there. I like original games that aren't a rip-off of something else. A new type of experience.

Q: How do you think Zelda stacks up to Mario?

Rich: I think it blows it away.

Q: How long is the book?

Rich: 112 pages, full color. We used about 30 screen-shots and lots of character line art of all the characters.

Q: The book is part of a series Sybex is launching. Do you know what other titles will appear in the series?

Rich: The series is called Pathways to Adventure. We don't know how many we will do, but Zelda is the first one. We're now in negotiations for the Pokemon license and I've already started on that book. It will be focused less on the game, and more on the Pokemon universe. We will approach other companies soon.

Q: Have you thought about Donkey Kong or Perfect Dark?

Rich: Banjo-Kazooie would have been good, but it's already out for too long. Perfect Dark – we want to skew to a younger audience, but we were kicking around the idea of doing something like Resident Evil, but with a younger, "Goosebumps" approach.

Q: Have you thought about an original sequel to Zelda 64?

Rich: No, not really. I don't know if Nintendo would allow it yet, because I think they want to figure out what they want to do with the series, before they allow us to change the storyline in any way. They would want the stories to all mesh together. Until Nintendo announces its formal plans for a sequel, they probably won't let us do anything. But this novel, as a standalone novel, will even interest kids who don't have an N64. People who have the game will enjoy it even more.

Thanks for the interview.

For more information, visit Jason's website at
<http://www.jasonrich.com>.